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# Building Bridges: Supporting Peace-building through Funding Reconciliation – the Example of the IFI Community Bridges Programme

**Duncan Morrow**

In the context of polarised and divided societies, the question of how to make peace is both the alpha and omega of public life: It is both necessary and impossible. In a context where people at loggerheads live side by side, or even mingled together, escalating violence creates and recreates its own reasons why co-operation is either mad or bad or both. But, critically and precisely in this context, violence cannot deliver any decisive victory. Violence is both the obvious and hopeless response to its own crisis, deepening the predicament but offering no final answers. Once this predicament is recognised, the question of how or why violence might be abandoned therefore becomes the Holy Grail. Whole schools in universities are given over to the study of this predicament.

Conflict in Northern Ireland developed along these lines over many generations. Each side finds its own origins and causes in the actions of the other. Theoretically, the conflict is driven by a political dispute over legitimacy between people defining themselves as British and Irish. What was unusual after 1972, however, was the degree to which the states which represent those identities, the United Kingdom and Ireland, made enormous efforts to prevent the spread of rivalry over identity and legitimacy into their own core, treating it as an outgrowth of the religious subtext (Catholics and Protestants) rather than a crisis of state formation in a post-colonial quagmire.

In 1985, in one of the most important diplomatic interventions in British-Irish history, the governments in London and Dublin entered into a new relationship of partnership over Northern Ireland in the form of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. While they did not resolve the Northern Ireland question, they put a firm line under any hopes that the crisis in the North would be allowed to determine the relationship of states. From now on, London and Dublin were

allies not enemies over Northern Ireland. Furthermore, they were strongly supported in this attempt to avoid war by their allies in America and Europe

The Anglo-Irish Agreement may have succeeded at diplomatic level. But it did so at the cost of rupturing relationships with the Ulster Unionists, and further alienating republicans, who regarded it as a great historic betrayal. The model of peace emanating from the Anglo-Irish Agreement was one of accommodation: the consequences on the street and in traumatised communities were of suspicion and alienation. The Anglo-Irish Agreement created an infrastructure of inter-state partnership but with no democratic security in popular support where it mattered – in Northern Ireland. What remained was a deeply divided society in the north and economic catastrophe in both parts of Ireland. Large-scale private sector employment in Northern Ireland had almost disappeared, whereas the south, after a flourish in the 1960s had returned to mass emigration and high unemployment.

In an attempt to address some of these challenges, but with only a very sketchy roadmap as to how it might be done, the British and Irish governments sought international support for their efforts at a new beginning. One of the most tangible results was the International Fund for Ireland, which was established in 1986 as an independent organisation under an international agreement between the British and Irish Governments. The Fund offered two possibilities: by bringing in additional resources it allowed for the exploration of peace building at a different level – if politics was failing to deliver comprehensive solutions, perhaps the route to local co-operation was through economic regeneration and through local co-operation in economic and social progress. But in addition, the fact that the money was sourced from external partners and distributed by an independent board allowed for a freedom of action with the potential beneficiaries which could not be guaranteed if the lead agencies were the governments.

The Fund had both a freedom of manoeuvre and a critical mass of financial resources to make its own independent relationships within society, separate from those of governments. The freedom was not complete – suspicions in 1986 were so high that it could not be thus. But in an economy as battered as that of Ireland, the possibility of expanding the concept of self-interest beyond mere survival offered new and important opportunities.

The Board of the Fund was appointed jointly by the British and Irish Governments and assisted by an Advisory Committee comprised of senior officials appointed by the two Governments. To this day, the United States of America, the European Union, Canada, Australia and New Zealand are

represented by their international observers at meetings of the Board<sup>1</sup> reflecting the origin of most of the donations to the fund.

Over the years, the United States<sup>2</sup> and the European Union<sup>3</sup> were the largest donors to the International Fund, each contributing about 40% of total funds. By 2002, the USA and the EU made up 90% of donations to the fund, and by 2009, the European Union was the largest single donor partly as a result of exchange rate fluctuations. Between 1986 and the end of 2010, the IFI contributed £628m to 5,800 projects across Ireland, with a strong emphasis on Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Irish Republic<sup>4</sup>.

**Table 1: IFI- Sources of income (selected years)**

	USA	EU	Other donor	Interest
<b>2002</b>	\$25m (52%)	€15m (37%)	Canada (0.6%)	(10%)
<b>2003</b>	\$25m (50%)	€15m (39%)	0	(10%)
<b>2009</b>	\$15m (32%)	€15m (46%)	Canada (1%)	(21%)
<b>2010</b>	\$17m (48%)	€15m (58%)	0	(-8%)

## **The development of IFI funding for reconciliation**

The International Agreement setting up the Fund (1986)<sup>5</sup> established its objective as to:

*Promote economic and social advance and to encourage contact dialogue and reconciliation between unionists and nationalists throughout Ireland.*

Reconciliation and economic progress were therefore closely linked. Economic development and regeneration were seen as critical to broader sustainability and matched with the acute concern about the economy across the island. This is reflected in the four key priorities identified for the Fund in its foundational documents:

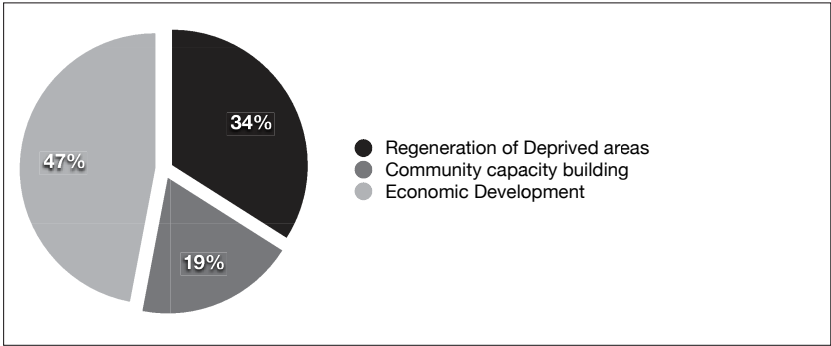
- a. Venture Capital for private sector development
- b. Projects to benefit people in both parts of Ireland

- c. Projects to improve the quality and conditions of life for people living in areas facing serious economic and/or social problems
- d. Projects to provide wider horizons for people from both traditions in Ireland

From the outset, the Fund was cross-border in nature, supporting economic regeneration across the island. As the peace process evolved In the 1990s, however, the Fund began to take an increasing interest in other approaches to reconciliation at local, northern Ireland and cross-border levels. In 1996 the Fund established the Community Bridges Programme, staffed through a direct secondment from the Community Relations Council who had developed an early expertise in reconciliation work. The task was to develop innovative inter-community and cross-border projects at grassroots level and was matched by investment in marginalised communities (Communities in Transition) and international business learning (Wider Horizons).

As late as 2003, the strong emphasis of the Fund on economic development and regeneration of marginalised areas was evident in the commitments made by the Fund.

Figure 1: IFI Commitments 2003<sup>6</sup>



In 2006, however, the Fund radically changed its profile and priorities. The runaway success of the Irish economy and the solid progress of the economy in Northern Ireland meant that the emphasis of both donors and board shifted towards social and political support for the peace process. As a result, the Fund’s new strategic plan (‘Sharing this Space’) in 2006 emphasised the importance of a shared future:

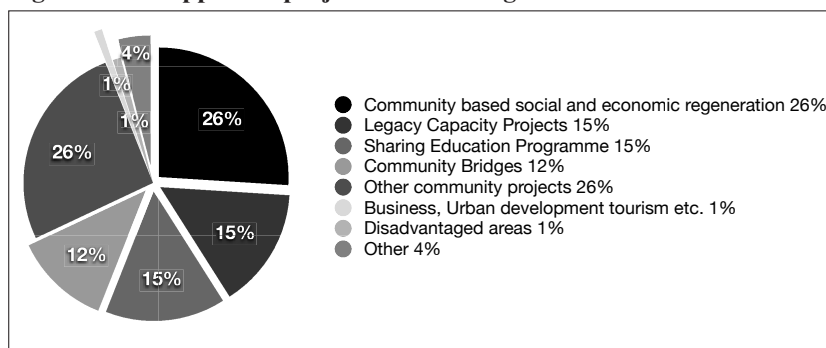
*Economic and social programmes will focus on achieving measurable reconciliation within and between communities. Cross border and cross community programmes will be the hallmark of the Fund’s work.<sup>7</sup>*

As a result, there was a measurable shift in emphasis towards community investment and support for change in crucial areas of social policy such as Education and Housing.<sup>8</sup> The crucial priorities within the Fund's new objectives were:

- helping to build and realise the vision of a shared future for the communities in Northern Ireland and both parts of the island;
- promoting understanding between the different communities/traditions in Ireland;
- working with those communities suffering the greatest economic and social deprivation, scarcity of employment and poverty of aspiration using shared economic concerns more systematically as a platform for stronger relations and reconciliation with their neighbours;
- facilitating more integration between the two communities.

As a result, the portfolio of the Fund had radically changed by 2010 towards reconciliation and community based regeneration.

**Figure 2: IFI approved projects outstanding Dec 2010<sup>9</sup>**



### **The Community Bridges Programme**

What defined the Community Bridges Programme from the outset was its design as support for entrepreneurial innovation and action. The model, possibly drawn in part from business, was of seed-funding ideas through developing innovative, practice-leading, community based programmes to support inter-community peace and reconciliation. Commitments were often generous but time-limited, and supporting projects rather than organisations. There was strong project development support and the Community Bridges Programme was marked by in-house engagement in co-designing new initiatives. While individual projects normally had a lifespan of around 3 years,

the programme structure encouraged developments and progress in one project to be applied in the development of new initiatives. This resulted in considerable expertise in the staff team in the process and dilemmas of practical development of a genuine inter-community infrastructure.

Throughout its existence the Fund prioritised tackling sectarianism and the political divide rather than the more general target of diversity. After 2006, the Fund emphasised the importance of the community base of projects and sought to expand the spread of projects across the whole of Northern Ireland and across the border. They also prioritised inter-community projects designed to tackle important issues, especially the issues of inner-city communities located on or near sectarian interfaces. Finally, although the Community Bridges Programme has pioneered work in schools over many years, in 2007 IFI established a dedicated Shared Education Programme administered through Queens' University and the Department of Education and Community Bridges' work with young people tended to focus more intensely on informal education and youth programmes.

The Community Bridges Programme developed in close co-operation with the Community Relations Council, the Northern Ireland body established to promote reconciliation from the ground up. In 1996, seconded staff from the CRC established the Community Bridges Programme within IFI. After 2002, the CEO of CRC was invited to sit on the Programme Team of Community Bridges to provide additional advice. CRC also designed and led a series of AMBIT study visit programmes on behalf of IFI designed to support the development of an educated and outward looking leadership within the community and voluntary sectors in Northern Ireland. In 2006, the Community Bridges Programme, by now the most innovative inter-community development fund in Ireland, was reintegrated into CRC acting as an agent for the International Fund.

By 2007, the Community Bridges Programme, sourced exclusively from sources outside Britain and Ireland, was committing over £3m per annum to community-based, inter-community and cross-border activity making it more than twice the size of the community relations core fund in that year. The result was a very broad portfolio of community based projects designed to extend practice into new areas of work, to spread community relations work into areas where there had previously been less activity and to develop an institutional legacy (See Appendix 1).

What is striking in reviewing the portfolio of Community Bridges Programmes is the sheer variety of community-based initiatives that had been

realised by 2010, and how far the range of possibility had changed and grown over twenty years. With only very few exceptions, the programme was strongly directed towards inter-community programmes rather than so-called single-identity projects and each was expected to develop significant learning. After 2006, CRC and IFI also radically changed the method of evaluation to allow for investigation into some of the core themes of IFI work rather than relying on project by project analysis by different independent evaluators as previously. In this IFI paralleled developments within CRC's core funding programme and suggested that independent but in-house reports which could then be published, subjected to public scrutiny and used to develop future work offered greater hope for consistency of judgement and learning than end-of-project analyses which often lay unused when projects came to an end.

A pattern of innovation, thoughtful development and sophisticated project design is characteristic of many IFI projects. By 2010, CBP's remaining investment in schools work was focussed on developing systemic change in schools and in teacher training, rather than on inter-community engagement. Likewise, an analysis of IFI's work with Churches illustrates the sophisticated range of methods which were now being tested to promote bridge-building. With a varying degree of institutional support, the IFI invested heavily in change in the denominational structures of the churches, encouraging tailored and agreed systematic approaches in both the Church of Ireland (the Hard Gospel Project) and the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (Peace Advocates Programme). The church-fora networks which had been developed under CRC in the late 1990s were given systemic support through the Irish School of Ecumenics. The evangelical CCCI was encouraged to engage with loyalism, while reconciliation work in Clonard Monastery which had been central to many quiet initiatives in peace making over the decades was underpinned with a grant to encourage a longer-term legacy.

Openness to a variety of methods was designed to extend practice or to establish ways of working that could be sustained long after individual projects had completed. Towards this aim, CBP supported community relations work through:

- sports (such as Peace Players International, aiming to work with 15,000 young people or Glentoran Partnership aiming to transform the image of a football club);
- arts (Arts for All, Artability);
- history and reflection (promoting Gaslight's Epilogue series as a vehicle to consider the complexity of the legacy of violence); and
- broadcasting (the US television series, Sesame Street, was adapted for a Northern Ireland and UK audience as 'Sesame Tree').



Programmes to generate sustainable longer-term inter-community practice were piloted through leadership programmes (Fellowship of Messines), the development of a comprehensive mediation and conflict skills network through Mediation Northern Ireland and investment in Community Dialogue to train new facilitators capable of leading open dialogues on contentious issues. The Community Foundation (CFNI) was funded to categorise and analyse peacebuilding practice while Corrymeela and Glencree were supported to refresh their volunteering base.

Community Bridges youth programmes likewise ranged from interventions to tackle issues of community justice (NI Alternatives) or to reach young people at risk of getting caught up in criminal activity (Terry Enright Foundation), to complex and youth-led programmes on citizenship (Spirit of Enniskillen) and successful arts-based programmes to tackle sectarianism for young people (North West Play Resource Centre). Initiatives designed to demystify violence in areas as disparate as Claudy, North Belfast and Portadown (Public Achievement) and programmes to promote leadership for the most disadvantaged young people (Challenge for Youth) were widely praised. In 2009, it was clear that projects such as these or radical programmes to tackle sectarianism in disadvantaged areas such as the 1825 project or the YouthComm project to engage young people from across interface areas in Belfast were far from the stereotype of soft issue-avoiding encounter still doing the rounds in some quarters, and characteristic of too much mainstream youthwork.

The opportunities for funding innovation extended well beyond traditional categories of youth and community work. There were projects on:

- the impact of intimidation and fear on the mobility of labour (TIDES);
- the critical role of women in the promotion of change through community development (WRDA);
- the need to address community tensions as they impacted on organisations (Extern); and
- locally-based projects such as Co-operation Ireland's commitment to East Belfast, Kilcranny's investment in the Causeway area and the Derry Walled City Project to encourage the development of an intentional shared and mixed community on the city side of the Foyle.

IFI also supported a number of important cross-border projects which both developed important practice around history and commemoration (New Border Generation) and supported networks of community-based cross border initiatives in Donegal/Derry and Fermanagh/Monaghan. Support for two Peace Centres in Donegal and Limerick proved less successful and their financial

viability proved fragile when the Celtic Tiger collapsed and fascination with peace-building outside Northern Ireland started to wane.

Geographically, IFI's impact was most concentrated on the Belfast interfaces, where the need to innovate and support new practice was obvious. By 2009, IFI had supported a wide range of small local initiatives built on inter-community organisations in unusual places like Suffolk-Lenadoon (SLIG), Forthspring and Cornerstone as well as city-wide initiatives to support change in policy and practice at interfaces through Belfast Interface Project. The REAL project pioneered attempts to reach into the heart of communities who had grown used to hostility and doing things apart, and supported previously unthinkable initiatives between republicans and loyalists at Finaghy Crossroads, Short Strand and Lower Newtownards Road and across North Belfast. A parallel approach was also supported in the North West through St Columb's Park House.

In spite of the strong preference of IFI for intercommunity work, not every project could be structured as inter-community venture. IFI extended early support to the Parkside Community Association, a small republican enclave in North Belfast where the absence of a partner on the loyalist side did not prevent important internal community work, in Ardoyne, where tensions prevented inter-community structures but where all sides sought to reduce tensions after Holy Cross or in the Lower Shankill where deep internal loyalist feud in 2003 had left the community almost bereft of local leadership.

Where possible, however, Community Bridges sought to build strong, sustainable, inter-community frameworks. It was therefore central to important new shared living experiments like the voluntary inter-community project in Springfarm in Antrim and the innovative Greater Whitewell Community Surgery in North Belfast which created a widely based support framework for communities which were becoming increasingly polarised. These were then later to become important parts of other IFI programmes such as the Shared Neighbourhoods programme developed with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

## **Conclusion**

The scale and scope of activity supported by the Community Bridges Programme was unimaginable in 1986. At various times, the existence of dynamic programmes in communities helped to sustain a momentum in peace-building when the political process appeared to be in difficulties. The question

of whether innovation is possible and practical opportunities for inter-community living generated has been answered through the IFI programme.

Nonetheless, critical issues for peacebuilding remain. It is certainly true that the climate of peace-building in Ireland had altered hugely by 2012. Nonetheless, projects, no matter how innovative, are only one part of a society's transition. Ground-up initiatives must be seized, nurtured and spread through wider political support if they are to have a systemic impact. In some of the interface work and in glimpses in church activity at local level there is some evidence that the change has made a significant difference. But at the level of policy, support for a shared future has proved difficult to galvanise and prioritise. In youth and schools work, in community development and in the wider priorities of public policy, the question of sharing had been raised but it was still being avoided as either 'too hard' or contrary to the goals of still-competing political ideologies.

The lesson of the Anglo-Irish Agreement was that top-down initiatives were of only limited value if they failed to create the reality of peace for people in the midst of conflict. The lessons of the Community Bridges Programme and other programmes like it is that innovation is a vital element in the generation of hope and direction, in creating a broad base of participation in peace and in creating a visible and tangible meaning for peace. It is also part of creating a visible sense of the possible for politicians and community leaders alike. But unless it is absorbed into the mainstream of changed habits and policy it remains a vulnerable plant whose hope lies in the future. Whatever the direction of change in peacemaking, and the Irish case has examples of building in both directions, there is a moment of decision at the core of peacebuilding which remains to be embodied in the decisions to be taken by the whole society

## **Appendix 1: International Fund for Ireland Community Bridges Programme, Active Projects 2009 and 2010<sup>10</sup>**

Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland	Churches-Church leadership engaging loyalism
Hard Gospel Church of Ireland	Churches-Denominational approach to sectarianism
Irish School of Ecumenics	Churches-Inter-church fora, women's networks
Presbyterian Church in Ireland	Churches-Peace Advocates Programme
Clonard Monastery	Churches-Mainstreaming reconciliation
Link	Churches-Inter church and cross border project for peace building
New Border Generation	Cross border engagement
Ardmonagh Family and Community Centre	Cross border peacebuilding and leadership with Blanchardstown and east Belfast
Sliabh Beagh Cross Border Partnership	Cross border/cross community capacity Building in Fermanagh
Irish Peace Institute	Cross border-Capacity Building for future role
Donegal Youth Service	Cross-border -Building Strabane/Lifford links

NICHS	Cross-border cross-community project
An Teach Ban	Cross-border inter-community project for the NW
Inishowen Information Network/Mid Ulster Women's Network	Cross-border -Mentoring
Peace Player International	Intercommunity capacity -Aiming to work with 15,000 young people and train 100+ adults across region
Arts for All	Intercommunity capacity -Arts based approaches to conflict resolution
Extern	Intercommunity capacity - Challenging sectarianism in a regional organisation
Mediation Northern Ireland	Intercommunity capacity - Comprehensive mediation and conflict skills provision through associates
Women's Regional Development Association	Intercommunity capacity - GR training initiative for women in comm. Development
Community Foundation for Northern Ireland	Intercommunity capacity - Creating space for Sharing and learning
Co-operation Ireland	Inter-community capacity - Developmental and sustained cross community work
Fellowship of Messines	Intercommunity capacity - Leadership for change project

Forward Learning	Intercommunity capacity - Structured learning for peace
Glencree	Intercommunity capacity - Volunteer Development
Corrymeela	Intercommunity capacity - Volunteer development for reconciliation
TIDES	Intercommunity capacity - Break out Labout Mobility
Gaslight	Intercommunity capacity -Workshop programme to engage grassroots communities in peacebuilding
Holywell Trust	Local Intercommunity capacity - Walled City Neighbourhood Project
Intercomm	Local Intercommunity capacity – mentoring across North Belfast
Caw/Lettershandoney	Local Intercommunity capacity- Development support
Kilcranny House	Local Intercommunity capacity - CR programme for Causeway area
Ballymoney Community Resource Centre	Local Intercommunity capacity - CR support for North East
Glentoran Partnership	Local Intercommunity capacity- implement a Reconciliation Plan on whole-club basis. Promoting Glentoran as shared and open to all.

Lower Castledawson Community Association	Local Intercommunity capacity- Adult and youth community leadership programme to promote a shared integrated ethos on the Lower Castledawson estate
Ballynafeigh Community Development Association	Local Intercommunity capacity - To support the 'interdependence programme' for 14 targeted groups
Randalstown Arches Association	Local Intercommunity capacity - Community Leadership/CR Training initiative to develop community relations capacity in Randalstown
South Lough Neagh regeneration Association	Local Intercommunity capacity - Comprehensive Community relations leadership development
Springfarm and District Community Association	Local Intercommunity capacity- Creating and sustaining a shared neighbourhood
Community Dialogue	Inter-community capacity-Training facilitators
Artability	Interface -Arts based approach to issues on the Falls/Shankill interface
Forthspring	Interface-Volunteer and programme development
REAL - Ashton/Mount Vernon	Interface -Past the gatekeepers in North Belfast
Finaghy Crossroads Project	Interface - Preventative Inter-community interface project

Short Strand Community Forum/Bridge Community Association	Interface Project
174 Trust	Interface-3 year action plan for CR
Suffolk Lenadoon Interface Group	Interface-Addressing the legacy of conflict and sectarianism, community safety, quality of life and group development
St Columb's Park House	Interface-Alternative models of intervention for anti-Interface-social behaviour and young people in NW
Belfast Interface Project	Interface-Conflict Transformation Development
Cornerstone	Interface-Networking for west Belfast
Cornerstone	Interface-Local planning for peace and reconciliation
Greater Whitewell Community Surgery	Interface-Creating a cross community, cross interface partnership to build good relations across seven estates on or near the Whitewell Road
LINC Resource Centre	Interface-CR mentoring project to support volunteers and activists
Skegoneill/Glandore Common Purpose	Interface-To develop a cross-interface programme in the mid-Skegoniell/Glandore interface in North Belfast



South West Action Team	Interface - To reduce tension along the Broadway interface and promote engagement
Parkside Community Association	Interface - Create a stable and peaceful community within the Parkside area
Concerned Residents of Upper Ardoyne	Interface-Building CR in a loyalist community
Lower Shankill Community Association	Interface-Community Relations groundwork in a loyalist community of low capacity
North Belfast Interface Network	Interface-Support funding for CRC core funding in interface work
Ballymac Friendship Group	Interface - Over the interface from loyalist East Belfast
Sesame Workshop	Media -20 sesame tree programmes
NI Alternatives	Single Identity intervention - Action for community transformation programme
North West Play Resource Centre	Youth Arts-based CR for North west area
Spirit of Enniskillen Trust	Youth -Building Citizenship and Diversity Programme

Youth comm.	Youth - East North and West Belfast for youth work
Youth Initiatives	Youth - First steps - for young people at disadvantage affected by sectarianism
Terry Enright Foundation	Youth leadership programme for disadvantaged youth from North and West Belfast
1825	Youth- Peer education in CR for at risk young people
Public Achievement	Youth - Away from violence for young people in a cross community programme
Challenge for Youth	Youth - Citizenship and leadership
Newcastle Community Association	Youth-local CR programme for young people
Links Lurgan	Youth Project to provide a permanent youth centre in a safe and neutral setting
Shankill Parish Caring Association	Youth - To engage 150 young people to become advocates for a shared future
Lisburn Inter schools	Schools - Whole school approach to peacebuilding

School of Education	Schools - Development of teacher training modules
Community Relations in Schools	Schools- to create three regional clusters of schools in Antrim, Cookstown and North Belfast to undertake comprehensive whole-school approaches to inter-community work

**Notes**

1 [www.internationalfundforireland.com/index.php](http://www.internationalfundforireland.com/index.php)  
2 Country Profile: Northern Ireland/Ireland, USAID, 2009.  
3 International Fund for Ireland, press release, 7 October 2008.  
4 [www.internationalfundforireland.com/background/47-background](http://www.internationalfundforireland.com/background/47-background)  
5 Agreement between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the Republic of Ireland concerning the International Fund for Ireland, London and Dublin, 18 September 1986. Republic of Ireland No.1(1986), Cmnd 9908  
6 International Fund for Ireland Annual Report 2003, p50  
7 Sharing this Space, International Fund for Ireland, Belfast and Dublin, 2006. P11  
8 Sharing this Space, International Fund for Ireland, Belfast and Dublin, 2006. p6  
9 International Fund for Ireland Annual Report 2010, p36  
10 CRC Annual Reports, various.